Like ships passing in the night:

Towards a truly dyadic perspective on feedback dynamics

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Abstract

The aim of the current contribution is to plead for future research to adopt a truly dyadic and dynamic approach when studying feedback processes. We first explain how the current depiction of feedback processes might have been overly static and one-sided, and therefore risks providing an incomplete picture. Next, we identify conceptual logics for linking feedback-seeking and feedback delivery within dyads and profile a few studies that have begun to bridge the disconnect between feedback-seeking and feedback-giving. Finally, we provide potential avenues to begin studying feedback processes in a different way.

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Feedback-seeking behavior and feedback-giving behavior have been studied, both conceptually and empirically, like “ships passing in the night”. In isolation, the two traditions of feedback research have each produced on their own a body of knowledge that is coherent, cumulative and predictive of employee outcomes. However, at the same time, inconsistent findings or a lack of support for a few of the key theoretical assumptions, such as the lack of a meaningful, consistent positive relationship with task performance, have troubled both lines of research for quite some time (Anseel et al., 2015; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). We therefore applaud the position paper of DeNisi & Smith Sockbeson (this issue) calling to bridge the gap between feedback-seeking and feedback-giving research to increase our understanding of the interplay between both phenomena. While we hinted at such an integration in our own previous process models of feedback (Anseel et al., 2007; Anseel et al. 2015; Anseel, 2017), these models were mostly inspired by a quest to solve the puzzle of how employees’ seeking of feedback would eventually be linked to better performance. The call of DeNisi and Smith Sockbeson to adopt a more systematic approach by also examining how feedback-giving behavior will be affected by the feedback being sought or not, is timely and important.

The aim of the current contribution is to push the argument further and plead for future research to adopt a truly dyadic and dynamic approach when studying feedback processes. Since the first conceptual model depicting the potential interplay between employee feedback-seeking behavior and supervisor feedback delivery (Larson, 1989), research on dyadic processes in organizational behavior has

seen rapid conceptual and methodological improvements (e.g. Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012; Gooty & Yammarino, 2001; Liden, Anand,Vidyarthi, 2016). These improvements would allow us to go further in our theorizing and empirical modelling of feedback episodes as dyadic and dynamic processes. However, not only has empirical research never come around to testing the initial propositions of Larson (1989), more importantly, current feedback research seems to have not yet fully benefited from these developments. To address this issue, we want to provide a first step towards studying feedback episodes as a dyadic, dynamic process. We first explain how the current depiction of feedback processes might have been overly static and one-sided, and therefore risks providing an incomplete picture. Next, we identify conceptual logics for linking feedback-seeking and feedback delivery within dyads and profile a few studies that have begun to bridge the disconnect between feedback-seeking and feedback-giving. Finally, we provide potential avenues to begin studying feedback processes in a different way.

Feedback as a dyadic process.

The dyad is the most basic unit of interpersonal interaction and interpersonal relations. Dyadic constructs capture relationships, interactions, and exchanges that occur between two members of a dyad (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). As such, a feedback episode is in essence a dyadic construct. While it is possible to disentangle and examine the individual behaviors of the two agents involved in the episode, they are dependent on each other. Feedback seeking from one agent is aimed at another agent to provoke a response, leading the other agent to give feedback or not, which in turn might elicit a new response from the first agent. Thus, a feedback episode can be conceptualized as a multilevel phenomenon because the interactions occur between lower level units (feedback giver and

seeker), nested within a higher-level unit (feedback dyad), which may have its own characteristics (e.g., reciprocity, history, duration, frequency, timing, location, climate) influencing the attitudes and behavior of the agents.

Therefore, we argue that feedback research could considerably advance by better aligning conceptualization, measurement and analysis of feedback as a dyadic process. While theorizing around feedback seeking and feedback delivery may have already adopted a dyadic perspective to date (see, for instance, Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016; Larson, 1989; Moss, Valenzi, & Taggart, 2003), measurement and analysis have lagged behind. These have almost exclusively focused at the individual level, thus without taking into account the inherent multilevel structure of the dyad model. For instance, feedback researchers have provided participants with different types of feedback messages to examine how they respond to them (e.g., Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009). Feedback-seeking researchers have examined supervisors' interpretations of their subordinates when they seek feedback (e.g., De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & de Luque, 2010). While this type of studies offers valuable insights of the feedback process (and has also taken into account intraindividual dynamics over time, see for example, Ilies & Judge, 2005), they almost invariably limit their focus on perceptions or behaviors of one of the agents in the feedback dyad. As such, the actual feedback exchange is not studied, nor is the relational context of the exchange behaviors between the two agents taken into account. For example, when Alex gives feedback to Beth, this could be a consequence of (a) feedback giving behavior (e.g., Alex generally gives a lot of feedback), (b) feedback seeking behavior (e.g., Beth generally seeks feedback a lot) or (c) relation-specific feedback behavior (e.g. Alex gives Beth more feedback than others while Beth seeks more feedback from Alex than with others). By observing

Alex and Beth in multiple dyads over multiple feedback episodes would enable us to truly disentangle the dynamics of feedback giving and feedback seeking behaviors.

Due to the difficulty in measuring and modeling both agents' perspectives during the exchange, most feedback studies have adopted single-level and nondyadic multilevel approaches. However, as compellingly argued by Krasikova and LeBreton (2012), such approaches risk missing some of the fundamental properties of the interaction. The feedback agents are dependent on each other in their actions and take this dependency into account when planning their actions. So, prior or after approaching their supervisor, feedback seekers may anticipate changes in the feedback-giver's attitudes during the feedback episode or over multiple feedback episodes and adjust their behavior accordingly. Furthermore, and central to the study of feedback delivery, the agents are responsive to each other's concerns, actions and emotions and alter their behavior to maintain their relationship or not. The target of feedback-seeking is not a computer that delivers an automated feedback message on request. When being approached with a feedback request, a supervisor may feel that his/her subordinate is aching for recognition and may forego the opportunity to provide corrective feedback and instead give positive feedback. Depending on their prior feedback history or the timing of the feedback-seeking act, which are dyadic properties, the supervisor may be more or less prepared to give feedback or a different feedback message may come to mind. Thus, similar to all dyadic constructs, the relational core of feedback episodes is key to its understanding but probably understudied to date.

Apart from the exchange aspect, reciprocity over time is a second important characteristic of feedback dyads that seems currently underdeveloped. Feedback does not emerge from each individual as a standalone entity, because a

feedback episode is embedded within the reciprocal interaction between the dyad agents. Feedback data provided by a supervisor regarding his or her feedback giving behavior is dependent on the employee's feedback seeking behavior. Moreover, a supervisor's report of an employee's feedback seeking behavior is dependent on his or her own feedback giving behavior. Vice versa, feedback data reported by an employee regarding his or her feedback seeking behavior is dependent on the supervisor's actual feedback giving behavior, in the same way as an employee's report of a supervisor's feedback giving behavior is dependent on his or own actual feedback seeking behavior. This continuous influence between both agents implies mutuality, the reciprocal influence both feedback giver and feedback seeker have on each other over time, and has been labeled as a core component of a dyadic relationship (Ferris, Liden, Munyon, Summers, Basik, & Buckley, 2009). Missing this reciprocity within feedback research means that we may not capture the true relationship between for example feedback and employee outcomes, which may lead to biased statistical estimations (Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015; Kenny et al., 2006), and eventually to incomplete recommendations for academics and practitioners.

New Developments in Studying Feedback Dyads

While more theoretical work is needed to fully conceptualize feedback as a dyadic process, the main challenge in studying interconnections among individuals lies probably in the methods and models that can capture the specifics of interpersonal exchanges (Berscheid, 1999; Kivlighan, 2007). To provide some guidance in how new research questions may be tackled by adopting a truly dyadic approach, we describe emerging studies that have started adopting such a perspective. Harrison and Rouse (2015) used an inductive grounded theory approach to improve our understanding of how feedback giving and feedback

seeking evolve in a dynamic and dyadic way in a creative setting. Their study entails a qualitative perspective using observation methods in two settings, namely modern dance and product design. 88 feedback interactions were analyzed to model response moves of feedback givers and seekers during these feedback episodes. They found that particular interaction moves of feedback providers, such as uttering statements that denote a lack of understanding, induced specific answers of creative workers, such as adding more background to the project, leading to various feedback loops until the creative workers showed that they had new ideas to explore previous ideas or tweak and adapt existing plans. In the end, the study shows that the initial positions of feedback receiver and feedback provider transform into a fluid exchange where both agents co-construct the problem space that the feedback aimed to address.

While qualitative research is uniquely suited to go into depth and provide vivid examples of how feedback interactions unfold, also quantitative studies can provide valuable insights related to the dyadic nature of feedback. A recent study of Meinecke, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Kauffeld (2017) provides an excellent example of how dyadic and dynamic rather than isolated and static aspects of the feedback process aid in predicting outcomes. The authors shed light on the appraisal interview and trace patterns of supervisor-employee interactions to capture the dynamic interplay between both interview partners as the interview progresses. By coding different behaviors, such as the extent to which the supervisor shows task or relation-oriented behaviors, and adopting lag-sequential coding to analyze the data, they unraveled the patterns of interaction that led to higher interview success ratings. Emphasizing the importance of the dyadic nature of the interview, they found that relation-activation patterns in which there were reciprocal relationships between

relation-oriented supervisor communication and active employee involvement were linked to higher interview success ratings by both supervisors and employees. The frequencies of isolated supervisor or employee behaviors did not determine the success' perceptions of supervisor and employees.

A number of statistical strategies are now well established to aid researchers in exploring dyadic processes vital to improving our understanding of dynamics in feedback seeking and giving behaviors (Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012; Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015). The social relations model (SRM), the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), and the one-with many model (OWM) are three methods which can be used to study different research questions pertaining to the dyadic nature of feedback. The SRM (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) approach involves analyzing dyadic data collected from an individual who forms different relationships with different team supervisors or team members. Typically, a "round-robin" technique would be used, in which an employee lists all the team members from whom he or she receives feedback or to whom he or she gives feedback. This would for example allow exploring how differences in status, relationship qualities, or expertise among team members determine feedback seeking and giving behaviors. Similarly, OWM (Kenny et al., 2006; Krasikova & LeBreton, 2012) is designed to analyze data collected from an individual who forms multiple relationships (dependent dyads) in a team. Adopting this method, Venkataramani, Green, and Schleicher (2010) for example asked team members to list the extent to which they sought advice from different supervisors and looked at how their network centrality shaped LMX and members' work attitudes. A similar approach focusing on network centrality in feedback seeking could be interesting to further unravel feedback seeking and feedback giving dynamics. Moreover, this approach would also allow to

look at the extent to which the supervisor personalizes his/her feedback giving approach and explore the effect on the effectiveness of feedback. While, SRM and OWM focuses on multiple existing relationships, APIM (Kenny et al., 2006) enables data analysis collected from two individuals who belong to the same dyad and allows testing of reciprocal effects. Hence, APIM is uniquely suited for one-on-one feedback interactions and can help determine whose and which attitudes or behaviors influence particular outcomes (in the actor or the partner), while taking into account the characteristics of the dyad. Dyadic mediation effects can also be assessed via the actor-partner interdependence mediation model (Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011).

Part and partial of a dyadic approach to feedback seeking and feedback giving is the temporal aspect and more specifically the sequence of feedback seeking and feedback giving episodes within the dyad. Relational event modeling can help incorporate this dynamic aspect by looking at sequences of events and how they lead to emergent feedback patterns between members of a dyad (DuBois, Butts, McFarland, & Smyth, 2013; Kozlowski, Chao, Grand, Braun, & Kuljanin, 2013). Each feedback seeking and feedback giving interaction can be seen as driven by the situational context, the attributes of the partners within the dyad, and the preceding sequence of feedback seeking and giving episodes (Leenders, Contractor, & DeChurch, 2016). Schecter, Pilny, Leung, Poole, and Contractor (in press), for example apply relational event modeling to analyze sequences of interactions within teams to see how they relate to emergent processes such as knowledge sharing and cooperation. Using a dataset comprised of 55 military work teams the authors found that frequent reciprocal interactions were associated with greater perceived knowledge sharing and cooperation in the team. A stronger tendency towards

preferential attachment on the other hand had a negative effect on perceived process quality. Similarly, feedback processes can be seen as emergent processes that entail various cognitive, affective, communicative, and behavioral activities that enable and constrain employees to accomplish their tasks and goals (Schecter et al., in press). The feedback pattern within a dyad grows and evolves with each new feedback episode until it culminates in a personalized feedback pattern which can be considered as effective or ineffective.

Future research incorporating a dyadic perspective

Given the promise for advancing our understanding of feedback processes, we propose that future research tries to include at least one or more of the following elements in dyadic studies of feedback. First, feedback researchers should measure the perspectives or actual feedback behaviors of *both* feedback agents. Second, features of *the feedback dyad* (e.g. intensity, frequency, duration, reciprocity, history) should be observed through studying multiple interactions within different dyads. Third, logically following from the previous element, studying feedback episodes should involve *a time perspective* and examine feedback behavior over time within one or over multiple feedback episodes. Tapping into one feedback episode on a micro level using time series analysis would lead scholars to gain insight in the reciprocity of feedback giving and feedback seeking behaviors of different dyads (for an example of time series analysis, see Sadler, Ethier, Gunn, & Woody, 2009). For instance, using digital technologies, such a micro perspective could also start mapping non-verbal behaviors in feedback conversations. When Alex is talking to Beth about an ongoing shared project, Beth might engage in a leaning forwards position as part of feedback seeking behavior. In turn, this might trigger Alex to give negative feedback about a particular behavior of Beth during the project, which might

trigger a defensive reaction. As a consequence, this could lead to Alex being more careful about giving feedback to Beth in future feedback episodes. Capturing these reciprocal behaviors within a feedback episode, may lead to new insights on crucial events within episodes and how these events influence future episodes.

In addition to a micro approach wherein one feedback episode is partitioned into small sequences, another interesting avenue for future research is to follow a dyad over a longer period of time such as one year and look into the broader feedback interaction pattern that unfolds. By focusing on for example employee-supervisor dyads or two interdependent colleagues, the sequence of feedback giving and feedback seeking interactions within this dyad over time could help to outline patterns of feedback interactions which could be used to predict relationship quality and work-related output. Moreover, important practical implications can be derived from zooming into how a specific dyad overcomes a detrimental feedback pattern and transforms this into a beneficial feedback interaction loop (or vice versa). Ideally, an event-based approach is taken in which both partners of the dyad complete a short questionnaire after a new feedback interaction has unfolded.

In summary, a dyadic perspective can contribute to a better understanding of how feedback exchanges are idiosyncratic, and develop their own dynamic over time through various feedback seeking and feedback giving episodes. Studying static, uniform feedback aspects, such as in cross-sectional studies of feedback valence, has had great value to unravel an universalistic view of the feedback process. This however has taught us little about the idiosyncrasies and effectiveness of feedback interventions applicable to a particular feedback dyad. More specifically, the characteristics of the feedback giver and receiver, the relationship between them, and the previous sequences of feedback interactions can shape reactions towards

the feedback. Hence, the static and one-sided perspective which is often taken in previous research on feedback limits our understanding of how feedback unfolds in organizations and future research would benefit from taking a more fine-grained dyadic and time-bound perspective on feedback dynamics. In the end, adopting such an approach should help solving the puzzle identified by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), that is still standing, namely that feedback interventions “under certain condition are detrimental to performance”. Similar to Tolstoy's famous observation that “happy families are all alike but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”, it could be that the key to understanding detrimental feedback conditions is a better understanding of idiosyncratic feedback dynamics over time: Every ineffective feedback dyad might be ineffective in its own way.

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